# Business support and training in minority-ethnic, family-run firms: the case of SMEs in Scotland

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# Business support and training in minority-ethnic, family-run firms: the case of SMEs in Scotland

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Minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs perform an increasingly important role in the Scottish economy. Yet, research has identified that such businesses are less likely to access publicly-funded business support and training opportunities. This paper draws upon 14 interviews with senior representatives of minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs as well as government agencies and business support organisations to assess the perceived barriers to accessing such support and reports upon the internal dynamics within such businesses. The findings show that minority-ethnic, family-run firms are nested in particular value systems and narratives that exist to protect both the family unit and business entity and give voice to their history and experience. Such firms exhibit a high level of internal control and self-reliance with a preference for individual trust-based relationships rather than formal arrangements with public institutions. The findings also show a disconnect between universalistic business support provision available from government agencies and the preference by minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs for more specific solutions. The paper concludes that family and ethnic cultures play an important role in how minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs choose to learn and this makes the provision of business support and training a complex and often paradoxical issue.

Keywords: ethnicity; family business; embeddedness; business support; entrepreneurial learning

## Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the Scottish economy, with family-run SMEs accounting for 77% of all SMEs (Scottish Government, 2016; Memili et al., 2015). Between 2012 and 2014, the number of

minority-ethnic, family-run firms doubled in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2016), mirroring a similar trend across the minority-ethnic population as a whole (National Records of Scotland, 2014). As a result, development of enterprise among minority-ethnic communities has become a politicised issue. The Scottish Government emphasises what it terms 'inclusive growth', looking to support economic growth across all levels of society (Scottish Government, 2015; Scottish Government, 2014a, MIT REAP, 2014). Though their precise influence is difficult to measure, there is a generally held view that SMEs from minority-ethnicities can act as a vehicle for economic and social inclusion (Netto et al., 2001), forming a bridge between centralised policy decisions and more community-based initiatives and applications (Carter et al., 2015; Hussain & Matlay, 2007; Jones & Ram, 2012). This prompts us to consider how these unique and complex businesses are best supported in their development.

Despite significant public investment in business support and training initiatives, research amongst minority-ethnic businesses in Scotland found that they were less likely to access formalised support and were often unaware of its existence. Some firms reported finding the services either too time-consuming to access or not aligned to their cultural and business needs (Deakins et al. 2005; McGill, 2007). The Scottish Government (2014b) recognises the need for appropriate and relevant business support, identifying the need to develop tailored education programmes for business owners and greater engagement with particular business training and learning requirements. This comes off the back of criticism of historical schemes and work-based training initiatives for overlooking the support needs of the business, favouring the educational needs of the individual (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011; Canning & Lang, 2004; Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

The relationship between minority-run SMEs and formal business support services can be explored through the lens of entrepreneurial learning (Taylor & Thorpe,

2004). Learning in small firms, and in particular learning in small family firms, is found to be characterised more by relational constructs, than formal training interventions (Macpherson & Holt, 2007). Thus, the social context and pre-existing relationships of the firm takes on enhanced meaning to inform how learning takes place (Baker et al., 2003). In minority-ethnic family businesses, these relationships are dominated by close and extended kinship ties, to the extent that the businesses can be seen as an extension of the family (Basu & Altinay, 2002). We view entrepreneurial learning in minority-ethnic family business from a contextualised perspective to examine such a familial and cultural influence (Barrett et al., 2001), and the implications this has for how these firms engage with institutional support systems. Essentially we ask: *how does the contextualised nature of learning in minority-ethnic family-run SMEs impact on their relationship with formalised business support and training offerings?*

We utilise family systems and embeddedness theories to explore the internal dynamics of minority-ethnic family-run SMEs. This allows us to incorporate the dual dimensions of close-knit familial ties and the influence of ethnicity in understanding how these firms address business support and training needs, and explain limited engagement with more formalised support. As such, we respond to calls from Danes et al. (2008) to investigate more fully the ethnic, cultural and familial context within which these businesses operate. We consider the perspectives of both the businesses themselves and those delivering business support. Our findings highlight disconnects in the nature of service provision and the social dynamics of the businesses. We examine and explain the failure of support agency offerings to account for the contextualised nature of learning in these firms. Finally, we formulate recommendations to enhance business support targeted at minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs.

**Entrepreneurial Learning in Family Business**

With the realisation that entrepreneurs must learn in order to grow and progress (Cope, 2005), a broad body of literature has developed on how and where entrepreneurs acquire this learning (Minniti & Bygrave, 2001). While Wang and Chugh (2014) suggest that the literature still suffers from fragmented immaturity and often individualistic views, a number of perspectives have emerged to explain how entrepreneurial learning takes place. For instance, experiential learning (Dimov, 2007; Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009), absorptive capacity (Zahra & George, 2002), and the challenge of collective learning (Dutta & Crossan, 2005; Wang, 2008), have all been espoused as being relevant in explaining the learning of entrepreneurs and small businesses.

A pointed focus on the characteristics of small family firms considers the particularities of context as having meaningful implications for how entrepreneurial learning takes place. Hamilton (2011) sees learning in family firms as embedded in the practices and relationships of everyday scenarios, as opposed to being delivered through formulaic training manuals and critical incident approaches (Cope & Watts, 2000). This view accentuates the socially situated nature of the family firm, and borrows much from Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas of situated learning and communities of practice. Family businesses are thus seen to rely on unique and complex interpersonal dynamics to inform how learning occurs (Hall & Nordqvist, 2008). An implication of this is that family members will embrace business values from an early age, even before entering formal employment (Chirico, 2008). This focus on shared meaning is strengthened by informal learning processes (Miller & Le Bretton-Miller, 2006), which are less structured and more embedded in shared history and experience (Handley et al., 2006).

Perhaps more than other business forms, the socially situated nature of learning within small family businesses causes more formal developmental interventions to struggle for legitimacy (Konopaski et al., 2015). In viewing entrepreneurial learning as a socially mediated phenomenon, we see the effect that strong family bonds can have on how the business develops (Anderson & Gaddefors, 2016). Family businesses can be characterised by a unique and specific set of values and norms communicated through long and intense periods of social interaction (Kotlar & DeMassis, 2013). As such, small family businesses can be considered to operate within a 'periphery' space (Wenger, 1998), separated from formal training institutions and business advice services (Felzensztein et al., 2013), but more connected to learning from their immediate community of known actors.

Though entrepreneurial learning in peripheral spaces was first conceptualised in the context of rural entrepreneurship (Anderson, 2000), Rae (2017) notes that the periphery may be a social, rather than a geographic space. An important element of learning in peripheral spaces is the connectedness with a central community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Felzensztein et al. (2013) suggest that a disconnect between the periphery space and the centre can, in many ways, define possibilities for entrepreneurial growth. This echoes the thoughts of Rae (2005), who sees the periphery as a place of disadvantage and vulnerability, where an emergent connection with the centre is essential for a business to develop and benefit from shared learning and value creation with the mainstream.

To examine the socially situated nature of entrepreneurial learning in minority-ethnic family-run SMEs further, we focus on the interplay between the relational dynamics of the family and the role of ethnic culture. At first we consider family systems theory as a mechanism for explaining the relational nature of learning and

knowledge in the family firm. Following this we consider the embeddedness of these firms in an informative ethnic culture.

**Family Systems Theory**

The presence of closely-knit family members, with an abundance of historical knowledge and relational experience residing in their collective memories, provides small family firms with distinct resource advantages when compared to non-family firms (De Massis et al., 2016). Le Breton-Miller and Miller (2006) assert that family businesses are typified by a concentration of knowledge as a reference point for quick and aligned decision making. According to Dess and Lumpkin (2003), a positive consequence of this engenders stability and long term security for organisational members. The influence of family also infuses small family firms with cohesive benefits arising from close relationships, enabling shared values and norms to inform behaviour (Zellweger et al., 2013).

To understand the social dynamics within family businesses, family systems theory provides a useful framework (Bowen, 1993), viewing the family as an integrated unit with interdependent members (Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012). This in turn allows us to recognise that a set of distinctive processes and relationships exist as a result of the co-existence of two major systems: the business and the family. In explaining the underlying tenets of family systems theory, Kets De Vries and Carlock (2007) maintain that behavioural patterns within individual families are distinct and developed through enduring values, scripts and interaction patterns. They argue that these patterns define clear boundaries for action because of the integrated nature of the family unit.

However, each family system remains open, as individuals can influence the behaviours of others, and thus the system adapts (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012); family systems can be flexible (Olson & Gorall, 2003). Eddleston and Kellermans (2007)

underscore the importance of equilibrium, both within the business and in the family, suggesting that the potentially devastating effects of conflict are best countered by the emotional and altruistic bonds of family unity, acting as a corrective behavioural guide for the individual. As such, the family system employs altruistic coping mechanisms to adjust and return to equilibrium when changes occur (McNulty, 2012). In this regard, family systems are both cohesive and flexible: cohesive in their concern for the well-being, connectedness and harmony of the group ('expressive role' according to Parsons and Bales 1955), whilst flexible in their ability to react to situational changes and the external environment ('instrumental role' according to Parsons and Bales 1955).

In developing the concept of 'familiness' as a resource-base in family firms, Pearson et al. (2008) highlight the dominance of family systems in altering social capital's relational, structural and cognitive constructs. Family systems theory allows us to recognise this dominance in relation to the how the firms adapt to environmental issues. The closeness of ties within the family system means that closure and adherence to familial norms is likely (Arregle et al., 2007), as a return to system equilibrium is sought. Thus the family system becomes informative in how individual members find solutions to problems and makes decisions with respect to the business. Essentially, the family system dictates how organisational learning occurs.

The implications of family system dominance over business activity are many and varied. For instance, Chirico and Salvato (2008) suggest that the presence of family systems means tacit knowledge is often transferred via informal routes outside of structured business locations. This fluidity can facilitate quicker and more efficient decision-making, allowing small family firms to react swiftly to changing market conditions (Hatak et al., 2016). Also, through family and personal ties, the small family firm has access to a range of networks through which informal discussions can take

place expediting the transfer of experiences and knowledge (Zahra et al., 2007). Finally, the holding of shared common values and experiential bonds provides a framework for decision-making and influences firm member activity (Peters & Waterman, 1982, 2004). Thus, there are suggestions that the internal dynamics of family firms enable the leveraging of valuable family-based knowledge and its transformation into business action (Andersén, 2015), leading some to suggest that family firms operate within their own unique and nourishing ecosystem of business support (Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Habbershon, 2006).

**Ethnic and familial embeddedness**

Research into minority-ethnic groups identifies a further dynamic that adds to the complexity of how these businesses operate. Vorley (2007) asserts that minority-ethnic family systems have unique values and belief systems that reside and interact within a particular ecological context and can often be defined in response to a dominant culture, the culture of the majority (following the embeddedness arguments of Granovetter (1985) and Kloosterman et al. (1999)). How we understand this aspect of ethnic entrepreneurial activity has developed from a previous focus on cultural exceptionalism (Lyon, 1972; Helweg, 1986). When entrepreneurial activity, instead of being a visionary tale of business creation and growth, is a response to minority status and discrimination in the labour market, this can strengthen the insularity and dependence upon the family system as both a means and reason to develop the business (Virdee, 2006; Zhou, 2004). For instance, McCubbin and McCubbin (2013) argue that historical events and the legacy of ancestral experiences (stories about the founding of the business) are often ascribed symbolic meaning, leading those informed by such narratives to seek out others who possess a similar distinct worldview. The implications of this can influence how the business engages and acts with others, for example, Rahael (2012) discusses

how minority-ethnic cultures which embrace masculinity and patriarchy often limit female involvement and promote authoritative hierarchal structures.

In the entrepreneurship literature, the role of embeddedness helps explain the relationship between entrepreneurial endeavour and contextual surroundings such as culture (Granovetter, 1985; Jack & Anderson, 2002). In particular, embeddedness as a metaphor allows us to investigate the interdependencies and extent of an enterprise's nesting in patterns of economic and social relations (Dacin et al., 1999). From a minority-ethnic business perspective, Kloosterman et al. (1999) highlight two aspects of embeddedness pertinent to opportunity exploitation and growth. The first is based on the positioning of the business founder in a social and relational context. For instance, at the micro-individual level, minority-ethnic enterprises may benefit from a rich source of co-ethnic and often familial resources by taking advantage of financial and human capital which is willing, patient and empathetic in nature (Barrett et al., 2001). The second aspect is based on the local market opportunity structure surrounding the enterprise (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001). Markets present opportunities for an enterprise to exploit. However, for an enterprise to successfully pursue an opportunity, they must be able to access it and have the resource and ability to serve it (Kloosterman, 2010). At a local level, where there is a concentration of a specific minority-ethnic group, there is a natural, even captive market for the business to access (Kloosterman et al., 1999). In such a sense, the ethnic capital of the firm is implicated not only in building the resource-base from which strategic capabilities are determined, but also in the constitution of the surrounding opportunity structure. The dual aspects presented here have been termed *mixed embeddedness*, and for minority-ethnic businesses this provides us with a conceptual lens through which to investigate growth.

Alongside cultural ethnicity, Deakins et al. (2003) find that minority-ethnic firms often rely on family networks for support and access to resources (Ram & Jones, 2008), thus the power of family systems are enabled. In many ways, the culturally ethnic and family kin of the business intertwine to create a strong differentiated organisational identity (Werbner, 1999). Ideas of kinship can be extended beyond blood and marital ties, to include spiritual ties and community ties to produce a bond of affinity and closeness with those sharing similar values and experience (Paterson et al., 2013), building a resilience against the challenges posed by institutional structures (Wang & Altinay, 2010). We should also take particular note of the importance of religious beliefs in forming and shaping shared family values, often leading to their manifestation in family business decisions and activity (Hutchings & Weir, 2006).

However, Burt (2004) implies that over-embeddedness in homogenous ethnic groups and family ties lead to a lack of innovation and new ideas, a view supported by Wang and Altinay (2010) who find that employment growth through family does not align with productivity. Additionally, Jones et al. (2000) explains that a glut of co-ethnic businesses selling similar wares in an ethnically constrained opportunity market leads to the vulnerability of saturation, thus limiting growth and development. The importance of 'break out' from family and co-ethnic dependence is therefore underlined (Rusinovic, 2008).

While we do not look to underplay the important role that co-ethnic and familial resources play in the strategic direction of the firm (Barrett et al., 2001), businesses operating within such structures often assume a protectionist role, rather than a developmental one (Bureau and Zander, 2014; Jones & Ram, 2012). Thus a rather restrictive approach to learning in the organisation is taken (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Business support mechanisms are highlighted as a way of encouraging minority-ethnic

businesses to reject parochial instinct and diversity their skillsets (Jones & Ram, 2012; Masurel et al., 2002). We follow Gold and Light (2000) as we seek to understand how well business support initiatives and workplace training work with the complex social dynamics of minority-ethnic family firms, so crucial to economic and social development in Scotland. Though minority-ethnic businesses are increasing in number, questions remain over the accessibility and effectiveness of support available to such businesses, and in particular, their ability to grow beyond limited cultural silos, informed directly by their ethnic and family systems (Jones & Ram, 2012).

**Methodology**

A qualitative research design was selected for this study in order to examine how minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs address their business support and training needs. The study is underpinned by an interpretive constructivist paradigm as it recognises that minority ethnic SMEs are heavily influenced by social, familial and cultural settings. As Lauckner et al. (2012, 6) point out: "the meaning of experiences and events is constructed by individuals, and therefore people construct the realities in which they participate."

Interviews were selected because they allow the collection of information-rich data and they also grant interviewers the freedom to "follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings" (Bell 1999, 135). The study employed a purposive non-probability sampling approach and drew upon a key informant interview technique (Patton 2002). A total of 14 interviews was conducted; 6 interviews with senior representatives of minority-ethnic businesses and the remaining 8 interviews were conducted with representatives from government agencies and business support organisations providing training and support to minority-ethnic businesses. While 3 of

the 6 interviewees from minority ethnic businesses identified themselves with the title of "Executive Director" or "Chief Executive Officer", all 6 interviewees were members of the family owning the business. The criteria used to select interviewees for the study were (a) the interviewee must be either a senior representative of a minority-ethnic business or a member of an organisation providing direct support to minority-ethnic businesses (b) the minority-ethnic business must be self-defined as family-run (c) the minority-ethnic business must be a small and medium-sized business (this is defined as an organization that employs less than 250 employees (Ward & Rhodes, 2014)). Table 1 presents an overview of the 14 interviewees who participated in the study. It presents a profile of the minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs that took part in the study alongside outlining the characteristics of government agencies and business support organisations that participated in the interviews.

**Table 1:** ***Interviewee profile***

| | Gender | Age | Role (ethnic origin) | Size/Type of Organisation | Sector/Organisation Details |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interviewee A | Male | 31 | Executive Director (Pakistani) | 12 Employees | Retail & Property Management |
| Interviewee B | Male | 35 | Chief Executive Officer (Indian) | 230 Employees | Retail |
| Interviewee C | Male | 40 | Chief Executive Officer (Indian) | 3 Employees | Retail |
| Interviewee D | Male | 40 | Owner (Pakistani) | 2 Employees | Hospitality |
| Interviewee E | Male | 31 | Owner (Indian) | 15 Employees | Retail |
| Interviewee F | Female | 33 | Owner (Italian) | 4 employees | Fishing |
| Interviewee G | Male | 45 | Business Advisor (Scottish) | Minority-ethnic Business Support Organisation | Provides start-up support to minority ethnic businesses |
| Interviewee H | Male | 38 | Business Support Advisor (Burundi) | Government Business Support Agency | Provides support, training advice and information to businesses across Scotland |
| Interviewee I | Female | 42 | Business Support Advisor (Scottish) | Business Support Organisation | Provides training programmes to third sector organisations |
| Interviewee J | Female | 37 | Business Support Advisor (Scottish) | Minority-ethnic Business Incubator | Provides start-up support to women from minority ethnic backgrounds |
| Interviewee K | Female | 45 | Business Start-up Advisor (Scottish) | Government Business Support Agency | Provides support, training advice and information to |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | businesses across Scotland |
| Interviewee L | Male | 31 | Business Start-up Advisor (Scottish) | Government Funded Start-up Programme | Provides start-up support to aspiring entrepreneurs in North East Scotland |
| Interviewee M | Male | 57 | Business Growth Advisor (Scottish) | Government Business Support Agency | Provides support, training advice and information to businesses across Scotland |
| Interviewee N | Male | 45 | Business Growth Advisor (Scottish) | Government Business Support Agency | Provides support, training advice and information to businesses across Scotland |

Interview questions posed to representatives of minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs included: (1) What role do family members usually play in the business? (2) How supported do you feel by business support organisations in your area? (3) How sensitive do you feel business support organisations are to the specific needs of minority ethnic businesses? While interview questions addressed to business support organisations included: (1) How do you usually get in touch with business from minority ethnic backgrounds? (2) How does your organisation accommodate any specific needs/expectations that minority-ethnic family-run SMEs may have?

Gaining access to minority-ethnic group SMEs is a difficult process due to the tendency of such businesses to possess a 'fortress enterprise mentality', work long hours and exhibit a reluctance to engage with external bodies such as consultants, enterprise and training agencies (Ram et al. 2001; Curran et al. 1995). For this reason, the services of a research assistant from a minority-ethnic background were utilised to build trust with the businesses and outline the purpose and drivers for the research. Contact was made with the minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs through informal networks, community contacts and snowball approaches, while government and business support agencies were contacted through formal channels. A semi-structured interview format accompanied by an interview guide was used in this study. The interviews were conducted across central Scotland, between June and August 2017. Each face-to-face

interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was fully audio-recorded and transcribed.

The data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Maykut and Morehouse 2004) which involves four distinct stages. Shah and Corley (2006) describe these stages as follows: the first stage involves coding, comparing and sorting the data into categories; the second stage encompasses integrating the categories and their properties; the third stage consists of a comparison between the data and the theory and the final fourth stage involves writing up the findings. In the present study, the researchers used a combination of open and axial coding to collapse and categorise the data (summary diagrams of the thematic coding can be seen in Figure 1, in relation to our minority-ethnic business participants, and Figure 2, in relation to our business support organisation participants). Whilst coding, the researchers jointly discussed issues of interpretation to ensure dependability and credibility of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Within-case and cross-case analysis (Ayres et al. 2002; Dooley 2002) enabled critical reflection upon and consolidation of a final set of categories that framed the findings. These categories are:

(1) Importance of family and culture to minority-ethnic businesses

(2) Minority-ethnic SME interactions with business and training support

(3) Perspectives on support provided to minority-ethnic businesses

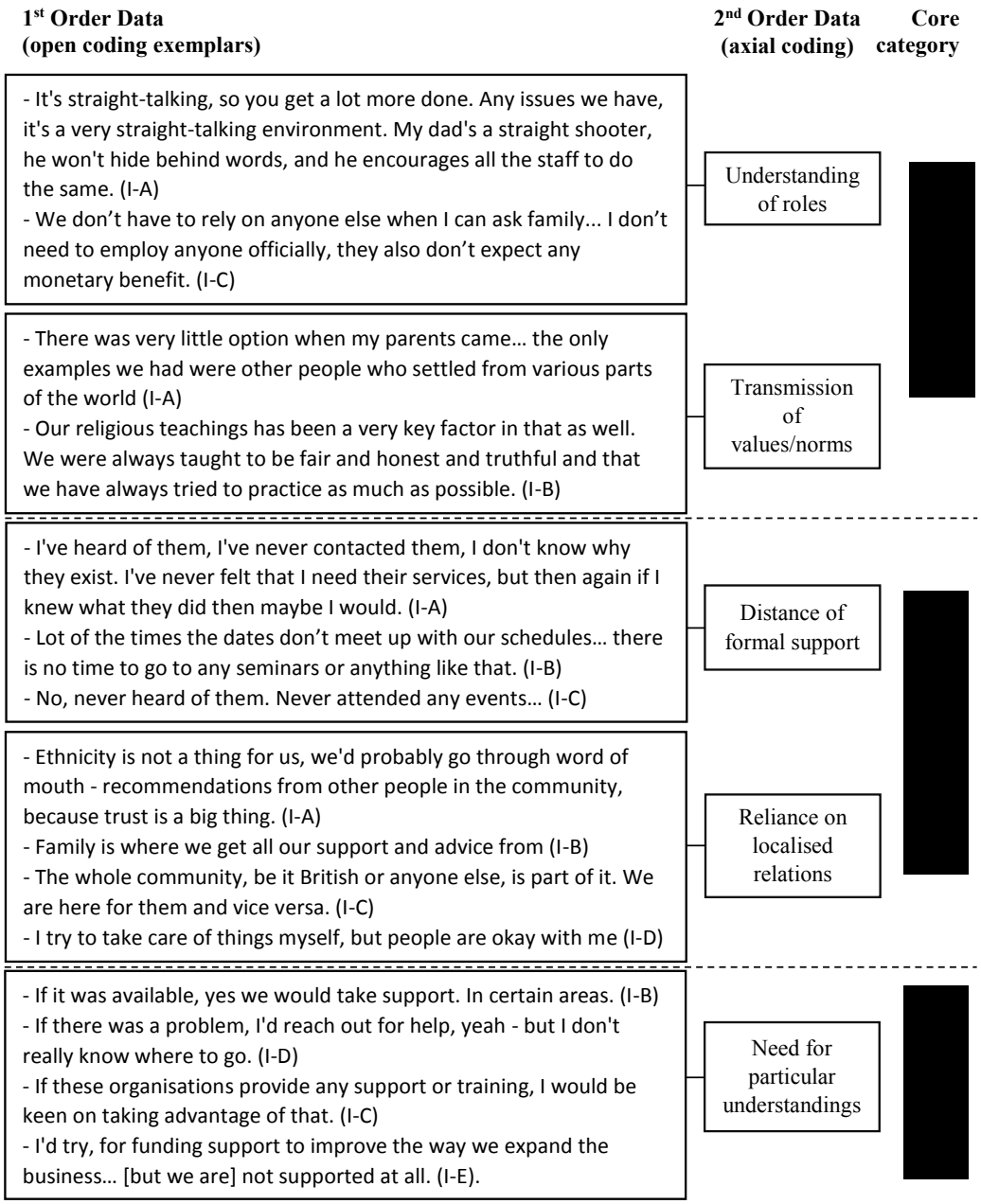


**Figure 1:** ***Data structure – minority-ethnic family business participants***

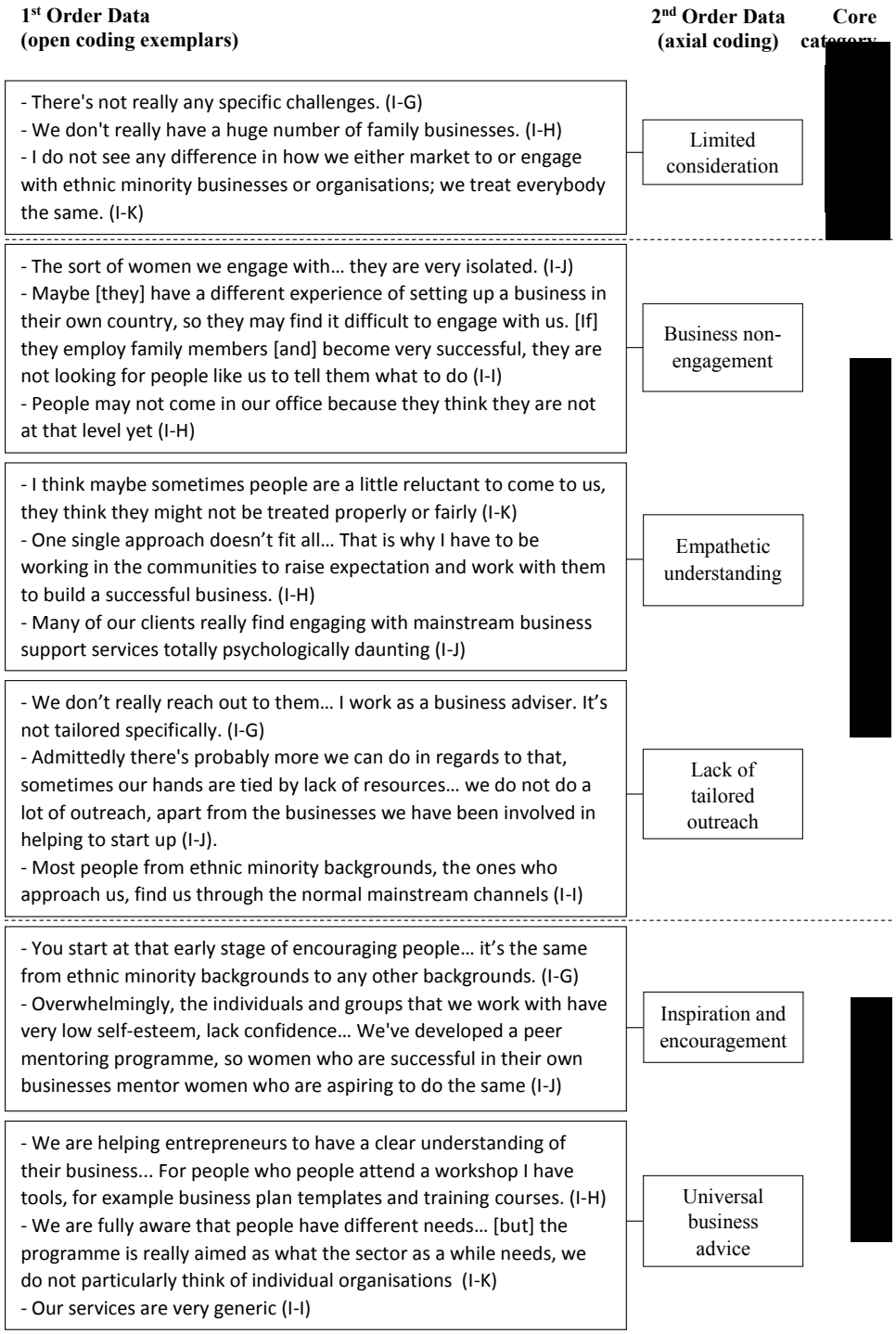


**Figure 2:** ***Data structure – business support organisations***

## Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper presents and discusses the findings of the study according to the categories identified from the data analysis adopted. Each category is examined in turn with many excerpts from the qualitative data presented as exemplars in order to maintain analytical validity.

### *Importance of family and culture to minority-ethnic businesses*

The influence and significance of family relationships on business practices in minority-ethnic group SMEs is a key focus for many of the participants. According to Ram et al. (2001), family relationships and ideologies imbue ethnic communities with cultural practices and norms which are conducive to entrepreneurial activity, suggesting that family businesses will often need to put in place mechanisms for resolving conflicts, particularly in first and second-generation businesses. Indeed, Seaman (2013) argues that familial ties allow entrepreneurs to exercise judgment over when and how much to rely upon the expertise and advice of family members in various circumstances, emphasising that role-conflict is best avoided through structured task allocation (Patel & Cooper, 2014). The interviews identify the importance of how individual roles are intuitively understood in small family business settings, as one business owner puts it: *'It's been difficult, but we've now got to a point… although there's not set roles, we know what we're capable of doing better than each other'* (Interviewee F, Owner, 4 Employees). Indeed, this has the benefit of playing to an individual's strengths as well as minimising conflict.

> Everybody finds it difficult to work with family. Everybody's got their own opinion, everybody's the best, and everybody's a manager. For us, we do have positions we know we're great at, so we stick to that. We've got somebody doing the paperwork, we've got somebody doing the cooking, we've got

> somebody managing, doing the PR, social media; we all have a post as such. It's a family influence, mum and dad come up with the ideas, they look for new locations, they look to strike deals for new stores or restaurants that are closing down. They're our eyes and ears outside the store. Family is for advice and prep. Dad's had businesses in the past so he gives advice, and mum's all about prep; she's business-minded, though she doesn't know it, but dad will advise on little moves where we can save hundreds of thousands or whatever. It's not really finance or employment or anything like that, it's more informal.
>
> Interviewee E, Owner, 15 Employees

A key perceived advantage of operating as a family business is the strength of family ties and the perceived alignment of the goals of family members within the business unit. According to Castillo and Wakefield (2007), if a family business is motivated by a family-first orientation, then business growth may not be a priority. Moreover, they suggest that in such instances, the unity, health and growth of the family may become the overriding objectives of the business, as organisational identity focusses on the needs of the family, rather than the needs of the business (Zellweger et al., 2013). One interviewee explains this in the following terms:

> The biggest things is that when you do things together, it's me, my mum, my dad, my little brother when he's around, we ask each other for advice, and because there's no alternative motive, there's no politics, there's no trying to win a promotion so you say certain things, there's no trying to be friendly with the boss, so you agree with them, there's none of that. It's straight-talking, so you get a lot more done…We've never been concerned about money, that's not because we have a lot, because that's not the case - we've been in financial difficulty many times, but we haven't been concerned by money because we believe that what's written will hit us and what isn't won't, it'll miss us.
>
> Interviewee A, Executive Director, 12 Employees

There is also evidence of generational cultural transmission within minority-ethnic family firms. Distelberg and Sorenson (2009) argue that family businesses are nested within particular value systems that emphasise the health, growth and survival of both

the family unit and business entity. Consequently, the stories, trials and values of the founding generation are often relayed to further generations as a mechanism for instilling a strong identity and unifying family and business entities. Subsequent generations of the family business appropriate these narratives (Dalpiaz et al., 2014) and their predecessor's engagement with institutional contexts (Wright et al., 2014) to understand their own place in the firm, informing the expectations and obligations of their role. The importance of history and background are relayed by one interviewee as a way of promoting family unity and shared experience.

> So, it actually started with my great grandfather who came to this country in the early 1960s, first landed in Birmingham. Spent time in the midlands, got a job, worked hard, and tried to generate enough income to call other members of his family. He was here for about two years before he could afford to bring over his wife and children and other members of the family… So my grandfather eventually moved up the country, went to Newcastle, followed by Manchester and eventually settled in Edinburgh. So when he got here, he kind of got a good energy and welcoming vibe; he liked the environment. He said he could see his kids and grandkids growing here… One of the key points to the success of our business is that all family members fully know the story and understand of what our forefathers went through to get us to the position where we are now. We would like to say we are quite humble beings in the sense we appreciate what they went through to get us to where we are, and we are just trying to elongate that legacy as much as possible and make them proud and be successful.
>
> Interviewee B, Chief Executive Officer, 230 Employees

The dominance of the family system comes through in a shared understanding of roles and the values of the organisation. Organisational knowledge becomes especially sensitive to the familial narratives employed, where centralisation and powerful personalities can place boundaries on the development of a knowledge resource (Cunningham et al., 2016; Valkokari & Helander, 2007). This leads Jones and Ram (2012) to suggest that family dominance determines the trajectory of the business as a

heightened form of embeddedness, as implied is our data, providing enhanced meaning to the role of ethnicity in the business (Adendorff & Halkias, 2014). The result of this can bind firms to familial enclaves and social structures, as they become reliant on empathetic custom and fail to build an awareness of broader mainstream support and opportunities (Oc & Tiesdell, 1999; Jones et al., 2000). To compound this disconnect, the support organisations demonstrate a limited consideration of how familial relations inform the nature of these minority-ethnic businesses. In fact, many business advisors are keen to point out the lack of differentiation made between these organisations, and others without such family influence. This divergence in how our participants approach the notion of family influence presents a key explanatory factor in the perceptual barriers between family firms and formal support institutions, a notion which resonates throughout the themes of our findings.

***Minority-ethnic SME interactions with business training and support***

Our participants acknowledge the resourcefulness of minority-ethnic family firms in identifying and seeking pragmatic solutions to operational problems. They attest to the busyness and fast-paced nature of work and the lack of available time to engage in what they consider added bureaucracy from outside of the family realm (Hall & Nordqvist, 2008). The family firm literature also connects such a resistance to more formal support mechanisms to an inherent fear of losing control in what they see as 'their' [the family] business, an unwelcome challenge to their embedded assumptions on the business (Miller et al., 2008). Interestingly, we find that our business participants emphasise more the importance of locality in support, rather than issues of ethnicity. One interviewee discusses the experiences of several businesses in his local area in the following terms:

> I've never actually seen a representative of any of these [business support] organisations. If they are sitting in offices, expecting people to come to them, people are busy working. In our area, we've got a Latvian coffee shop, it's a young chap and he's good, but he's been trying to crowdfund because the business as it is just paying the bills. Crowdfunding was the first thing he looked to do. Then, there's an ethnic restaurant, it's a guy from Bangladesh, a young lad he came here to study and then told his parents, 'I've got this idea, send me money and they sent him money from Bangladesh to open up his business'.
>
> Interviewee A, Executive Director, 12 Employees

The picture painted here of a distant business advice institution is echoed by many of the respondents from business advice bodies. While most are quick to explain the non-discriminatory nature of their service offering, in terms of ethnicity, they qualify this by stating, *"that's not the type of business that comes to us"* (Interviewee N, Business Growth Advisor), explaining this with the suggestion that the typical sectors of minority-ethnic family firms are not those which will normally require business support. One business growth advisor suggested that minority-ethnic family firms were usually *"lifestyle"* in nature, and therefore were less of a priority for business development agencies (Interviewee M, Business Growth Advisor). This again demonstrates the divergence of thinking found between family firms and the formal support institutions. Where the firms themselves see family and localised social relations to form a resource network to reinforce the foundations of the enterprise, there is a suggestion from the business advisors that this allows such firms to be characterised as inconsequential to their own agenda.

However, the support organisations generally revealed a high level of awareness of the distinctive patterns of working employed by such businesses and the challenges of building robust relationships with this community. They are also overtly conscious of

interfering in what Hussain et al. (2010: 4) call the significance of *'bonding'* social capital, particularly amongst minority-ethnic family firms and the tendency for such firms to seek out and find support from their own family and communities, a notion supported by our business participants' reliance on localised relations. One interviewee explained this situation in the following terms:

> We do not see a huge amount of ethnic minority people, and I think it is probably down to a lot of minorities staying within their communities. They also maybe have a different experience of setting up a business in their own country, so they may find it difficult to engage with us. Because there's a big family focus with ethnic minority businesses, they sometimes do not reach us through mainstream means. They might get their funding from other sources, like family.
>
> Interviewee K, Business Start-up Advisor

There were mixed views from interviewees on the implications of this awareness and empathy with the particular characteristics of minority-ethnic family businesses. While participants were clear about the perceived challenges facing minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs in accessing mainstream support, some agencies placed a stronger emphasis on outreach than others, and where possible provided culturally sensitive approaches (Dhaliwal 2006). Two contrasting views on the importance of outreach are presented as follows:

> We do not do a lot of outreach to existing ethnic minority businesses, apart from the businesses we have been involved in helping to start up, but we do absolutely tailor our services to meet the needs of the women in our ethnic minority communities. The women that we work with, they tell us that they would not engage with mainstream services. We are told it's for all sorts of different reasons. Many of our clients really find engaging with mainstream business support services totally psychologically daunting. With all due respect, I think a lot of mainstream business support that's out there does not cater to the

needs of individuals. Mainstream business support is not interested in tackling a lot of issues.

Interviewee J, Business Support Advisor

I run a programme in the community called 'Ethnic Business Support' in which I go to church, I go to mosque, I go to community halls, I go to colleges, I do drop-ins. When I deliver training courses in the community I have a lot of people, say 18 to 20 people, attending the course from ethnic minorities. When it comes to mainstream, we may have 2 or 3 people attending, and this comes under culture as an explanation. People don't feel comfortable coming to mainstream offices. In the community, we get ten, fifteen, twenty, even thirty people attending an event. When we put them with the mainstream or with any other ethnic minority, the number drops. Again, this can be different in terms of... my training is done on Saturdays in the community, and then most training is given during [weekday] daytime; this is something they're not able to attend. Saturday is a better time for those people to attend my workshop.

Interviewee H, Business Support Advisor

It seems that tension may exist within some business support organisations. An empathetic understanding of the challenges and pressures facing minority-ethnic family businesses, when it comes to interacting with business support, is countered by an access model designed to be passive and await enquiry.

***Perspectives on support provided to minority-ethnic businesses***

While many high profile schemes and institutions exist in Scotland to provide support to small business of all kinds (Mole et al., 2011), commentators have voiced criticism at the level of support provided to minority-ethnic businesses. Our participants echo this criticism, but focus more on the format of support, rather than the support itself. For instance, an important aspect by the business participants was revealed in the need for

direct and particularised engagement from business support agencies. Ram et al. (2008) report that business exchanges in minority-ethnic businesses are often face-to-face, informal and based upon trust rather than contractual arrangements – hence underlining the need for government and support agencies to visit and liaise directly with business owners and senior managers where possible.

> I think more face-to-face, one-on-one personal communication is needed. Rather than receiving a leaflet through the door or an email, sometimes you need a face to communicate with and I think that's more important. When I like to do a deal with somebody, I like to physically see them and sit with them and talk to them and I think we get more out of each other that way. These services are really good, but I would prefer somebody to come and meet me so they can sit down with me and show them the business and what we are doing so they can understand it a bit more.
>
> Interviewee B, Chief Executive Officer, 230 Employees

The targeted and personal needs of the businesses clash directly with much of what the representatives from business advice bodies discuss in terms of equality and universality of service provision. One business start-up advisor (Interviewee L) raised a concern of *"not understanding"* the specific requirements or needs of firms based in strong ethnic cultures, citing an example of a business idea catering exclusively for a co-ethnic clientele, an ethnicity of which he was not a part and therefore felt unable to advise. Another interviewee focused on the demands and expectations on their service provision, explaining that:

> We don't have the resources in terms of targeting specific groups… we have what's call 'displacement' rules, where we cannot seem to help one target group, or business, more than another. We need to be very careful around this.
>
> Interviewee M, Business Growth Advisor

Deakins et al. (2003) found that the generalised nature of business support provision in the UK would render publicly-funded agencies unable to account for the more cultural and familial aspects of minority-ethnic businesses - an issue evidenced here. Basu (2004) suggests that this disconnect is borne from an overemphasis on universally individualistic entrepreneurial endeavour on the part of policy-makers, which may explain the dominance of inspiration and encouragement in support content. While traditionally, entrepreneurship policy focuses on the individual, by applying family systems and embeddedness lenses, we can see that minority-ethnic family firms follow something more akin to entrepreneurial activity as a co-production (Anderson et al., 2010), where family, surrounding community, and individual activity combine within the business. Therefore, any support offering should take into account these more socially embedded elements which influence the nature of growth and development (Basu & Altinay, 2003). Thus, an underlying misunderstanding of how minority-ethnic family firms learn is highlighted, and this may account for the misdirection in formalised support and training provision.

In order to bridge this gap between universalistic and individual-focused support offerings and the socially-embedded, community-driven nature of the businesses, the importance of appropriate role models, or champions, is highlighted. Van Auken *et al*. (2006) argue that role models can serve as pathway finders for aspiring entrepreneurs, suggesting that a mentoring-type relationship may encourage and motivate small businesses to find and actively develop the skills required for growth. Hussain et al. (2010) go further and emphasise the need for such role models to be co-ethnic so that they can identify with the socio-cultural context of the new and aspiring entrepreneurs. This need for effective role models is discussed in the following extract:

> I think the biggest challenge is trying to find role models, people from an ethnic minority who have done it, who have founded start-ups that people can then relate to. It's all very well people like me, and adviser, saying "yes you can do it, we're here to help you", I think a lot of people like to know that "there's somebody like me who's done it". People don't come up themselves too much; there's a regime of self-help, if you like, within the black and ethnic minority group. People out there could be role models, who could inspire the next generation of social enterprises.
>
> Interviewee G, Business Advisor

However, there is also a concern that by pursuing ethnicity as the defining cultural characteristic, policy makers run the risk of reinforcing the marginalised aspects which have determined the nature of the initial start-up (Carter et al., 2015). Furthermore, Ram (1998) has previously warned of a dangerous preoccupation with social inclusion, over the more developmental and learning-based needs of the existing minority-ethnic business population. Jones and Ram (2012) posit that, if minority-ethnic family firms are to realise their growth potential, then learning and training programmes should look extend them beyond their limited cultural environments, this again brings us back to the tensions encountered by those designing business support agendas, whether to tailor services around particular ethnics needs, or maintain a mainstream and universalistic offering.

While our analysis sets out the various ways in which the themes of the study are constructed, Table 2 supplements this further by highlighting areas of agreement and areas of disconnect across individuals from both minority-ethnic, family-run firms and government and business support agencies. The table should be read in conjunction with the quotes contained within the main narrative of the paper. While some strong contrasts are noted, particularly around contact with business support institutions, the table presents fairly consistent acknowledgment in relation to the particular,

idiosyncratic ways of working within minority-ethnic family-run SMEs and the tensions and challenges in accessing support and finance to drive growth. Thus we can claim a common understanding on the nature of entrepreneurial learning in minority-ethnic family firms, but divergence in how the businesses and the institutions approach their respective roles in the development and growth of this learning and the type of support required.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

**Conclusions**

In this article, we set out to understand how the social dynamics of minority-ethnic family businesses inform their entrepreneurial learning, and explore the implications for publicly funded, training and business support provision. From our findings it would appear that there are at least three critical areas of perceptual disconnect seeking to separate these enterprises from the formalised business support and training services available to them. First, the businesses themselves are understood by all sides to have specific modes of working, and particular learning needs arising from their social situation which can render more formal learning initiatives redundant. Second, tensions are presented in how these businesses interact with support services, where localised business needs are often secondary to the universalistic and passive designs of formal programmes. Finally, individualistic development, the focus of much governmental support, is found to inform entrepreneurial learning behaviours in these businesses far less than social and familial influences. We argue that these three issues serve to alienate many minority-ethnic family firms from the public provision of business support and that a more bespoke understanding is required of how entrepreneurial learning takes place in peripheral spaces.

A variety of skills are needed to drive any business to fulfil its potential for economic and social growth (Bates et al., 2007), hence the existence of a variety of business support and training institutions. However, instead of looking to formal entrepreneurial education, we find many minority-ethnic firms look to family history and social context to inform their practice, thus positioning themselves on the learning periphery withdrawn from the universal support offerings of the centre (Hamilton, 2001). The businesses consider this appropriate as external advice bodies often demonstrate a lack of understanding of the more nuanced and particular needs of the firm. The implication for business support provision is something akin to alienation for these firms, as the businesses themselves look to read from their immediate cultural surroundings and innate understandings, while business advice services maintain an apprehensive distance, wary of misinterpretation. At best, this can mean the businesses become rooted in their own community, and while they may struggle to grow, they benefit from intuitive and accessible support (Carter et al., 2015; Kotey & Folker, 2007); at worst, these firms can become chained to a vulnerable and disadvantaged remoteness, unable to break from their tight, even parochial, borders (Felzensztein et al., 2013; Rae, 2005).

The concept of business support provision in Scotland is framed around a 'free to all enquirers' model. However, the nature of minority-ethnic family firms is such that the convenience of familial and cultural resources, along with the strategic leverage afforded to them by maintaining an ethnic distinctiveness (Adendorff & Halkias, 2014), mean active enquiry for support on their part is less likely. This situation is compounded by an array of support bodies operating under universalistic principles. It would seem that the interactive intentions of businesses at the social periphery and advisors at the

learning centre are common, but that the contextualised mind-set of each makes it difficult for a connection be made.

By applying family systems and embeddedness perspectives to this research problem we have uncovered the intricacies of how minority-ethnic family-run SMEs interact with their structural and social surroundings (Vorley, 2007). While our findings generally support calls for greater cultural sensitivity in training and business support provision (Ram & Smallbone, 2003), we offer a more nuanced understanding of the implications this may have for entrepreneurial learning. With more culturally informed support and training, objectives on inclusivity may be met, however, such particularity in the advice and learning offered may also seek to reinforce a reliance on culturally homogenous voices, undermining the 'break out' benefits to be gained from multi-cultural perspectives (Arrighetti et al., 2014). Instead, our findings point to a level of entrepreneurial learning informed more by the locality of relationships, than by ethnic characterisation. As business support and training programmes develop, greater engagement with localised forms of learning, moving away from passively universalistic models, may help build the connection between institutional desires for entrepreneurial growth at political centre, and those firms engaged with learning realities at the periphery.

Our findings suggest that business support offerings should be packaged in such a way that does not challenge the embedded and idiosyncratic assumptions of small family firms by prescribing generalist advice. A more flexible support offering which is malleable to the sensitivities of individual family firms is more appropriate, where the firms work to design the support in a co-creation with advisors, thus enabling the firm to comfortably protect the important uniqueness of their family and ethnicity. Second, a more localised and relevant communication of advice services may provide the comfort

family firms require in initial engagement with support services. There are suggestions in our findings that this may take the form of role models from similar backgrounds, or example firms who have been able to maintain their ethnic distinctiveness while engaging with centralised support. The important element is that family firms are made comfortable enough in the assurance that learning, and potential growth, from an informed centre does not necessarily mean a sacrifice of their own values and embedded meanings.

**Limitations and future research**

As with any work of an exploratory nature, there are many limitations and areas which future research can help to develop. First, for the purposes of this study we have addressed minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs as a common group. This study is intentionally designed to access businesses from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and minimise the risk of accentuating difference within the findings (Ram et al. 2001), with limited success as Pakistan and India dominate the business participant sample. Due to the reluctance of several minority-ethnic, family-run SMEs to take part in the study, the amount of data collected was less than planned and we cannot claim to have achieved data saturation (Miles and Huberman 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990). However, our findings reflect a continued reluctance of minority ethnic businesses to engage with mainstream support agencies and confirm earlier research findings (Ram and Jones 2008; Ram et al. 2001; Curran et al. 1995). A key point of distinction in our research findings relates to the identification of crucial differences across ethnic groups, endorsing the localised and situationally-specific nature of entrepreneurial learning in family firms (Hamilton, 2011). Based on this, future research would do well to purposefully stratify across cultural groups, this helping in the development of more tailored business support solutions. Furthermore, while we have designed the study to

include a range of voices from the businesses and institutional support functions, future work may look to take a broader view on the stakeholders of business support. Family support systems and ethnic-specific networks (not necessarily business-related) may be a useful starting point in developing an ecosystem of support for ethnically embedded family businesses (Stam, 2015).

Methodologically, our study does not look to generalise, instead, the depth of meaning and implications we have identified from the various perceptions of business support can usefully inform any future business support agenda. While there is nothing to suggest that our results will vary greatly elsewhere, it should be noted that the Government support functions and indeed the ethnic mix of any administrative state are a product of contextual and institutional forces. Studies in other regional or national areas may wish to take this into account in their work.

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